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STRATEGY AND AIRPOWER

I first read Col John Warden's book *The Air Campaign: Planning for Combat* in the summer of 1989 as a cadet at the Air Force Academy. It was, to my youthful eye, a revelation of how to think about airpower in a systematic way. Colonel Warden's five rings remained a strategic framework throughout my early career, and I think we are all indebted to him for his contributions to airpower theory. In fact, the speed and surgical nature of the first Gulf War seemingly proved the verity of his approach. Other airpower enthusiasts often cite the air wars in Bosnia and Kosovo as further supporting examples of the ability to use airpower for strategic effect.

More than two decades after originally reading his work and 10 years into our long struggle in Afghanistan and around the world against violent extremism, modern conflict has proven far more complex and intractable than to be holistically addressed by Colonel Warden's framework alone. His update of the five rings in his article "Strategy and Airpower" (Spring 2011) now "rings" hollow; it is overly simplistic and formulaic since airpower is just one "lever" among many in today's conflicts. In terms of countering ideological support for terrorism, airpower has had little positive effect, and collateral damage from even the "precise" use of airpower has been, at times, counterproductive. Thinking systematically is important, but we must be very cautious of reducing a thinking enemy to a system to be serially coerced, bribed, or destroyed solely through the use of airpower. Today our warriors, diplomats, and aid workers on the ground in Afghanistan and Iraq and around the world understand this intuitively as they engage complex, adaptive, and unpredictable foes.

Sun Tzu's admonition to "know your enemy" (his mind-set, language, history,

values, heroes, hopes, fears, etc.) is the human terrain where most Airmen exhibit weakness. The technological requirements of tactically succeeding as Airmen often dominate and sometimes inhibit their intellectual development of a strategic perspective. Colonel Warden's article gives additional evidence to Carl Builder's classic characterization of Airmen "worship[ping] at the altar of technology" (*The Masks of War* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989], 19). Airpower in air, space, and cyberspace makes significant contributions to our nation's efforts in conflict, yet it is but "one tool in the tool kit" in the joint, interagency, and multinational operating environment that we use to influence the opposition's thinking.

Airpower has an important role, sometimes leading and sometimes supporting, but commanders and strategists need to understand the history, cultural context, and "human terrain" before asserting that any simplified framework will produce desired strategic effects.

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Colonel Warden's article is well written and, in places, compelling. It is also ahistorical, relies on the selective engagement of Clausewitz's *On War*, and draws conclusions that are misleading if not downright dangerous. Although Colonel Warden caveats his use of Clausewitz as tangential to his main argument, the Prussian's theories refute nearly every aspect of Warden's claims. To argue that "airpower can and should fundamentally change the very nature of war" (p. 64) ignores Clausewitz's observations that war's character changes but that its nature—centered on the uncertain interplay of violence, chance, and reason—is timeless. Airpower has continued, and must continue, to operate in environments dominated by



Clausewitz's trinity. Never in history has technology, or airpower, altered the nature of war—and Colonel Warden offers no compelling arguments to explain its doing so in the future. On the very first page of *On War*, Clausewitz tries to disabuse future practitioners of war of the possibility of “bloodless force,” a notion that Warden links to some future iteration of airpower: “Kind-hearted people might of course think there was some ingenious way to disarm or defeat an enemy without too much bloodshed, and might imagine this is the true goal of the art of war. Pleasant as it sounds, it is a fallacy that must be exposed: war is such a dangerous business that the mistakes which come from kindness are the very worst” (*On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976], 75).

Colonel Warden joins the ranks of Douhet, Trenchard, and a host of other airpower advocates convinced that future iterations of

airpower promise to change the nature of war itself. These historically unsupportable arguments damage the credibility of Airmen in the joint environment. To paraphrase the great Prussian, war is—and always will be—about using force, or threatening to do so, to compel an enemy to do our will. Airpower can deliver force or coercively threaten the use of force in novel ways that deserve emphasis in the joint environment. This simple truth—not the seductive message of well-intentioned advocates of airpower like Colonel Warden—should serve as the starting point for airpower advocates. The lack of Airmen postured to command in joint environments, particularly at the geographic combatant commander level, should serve as an indicator that it is we Airmen, not our counterparts on the ground or on the sea, that “don’t get it.”

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